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THE FIRST FREEDOM
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Psalm 46
Matthew 22:15–22

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."
Matthew 22:21 (NRSV)

I was mesmerized by the television coverage before the government shut it down, or the massive protest rallies in the streets of Tehran two weeks ago. It was about an election that many concluded was not fair. But beneath the surface it was about a much more profound issue — the relationship of religion and government. Since 1979 the final authority in Iran has been the Koran as interpreted by the Supreme Council of Mullahs and the Ayatollah.

What is happening is a division between people who are comfortable with religion and religious officials wielding final authority and those who have come to believe that human beings have the right to choose who will wield authority and how.

It is this issue, in our culture, our history, our nation, of Church and State: and what historian Sidney Mead liked to call "The Lively Experiment."

Steven Waldman has written a book about it: *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America.* He begins with a fascinating account of President Thomas Jefferson on New Year's Day 1802, standing in the doorway of the White

House, watching as two horses pulled a wagon up the driveway to deliver a 1,235-pound cheese. It was a gift for the president from a Baptist church in western Massachusetts. Inscribed on the red crust of the cheese, four feet in diameter and seventeen inches high, were the words “Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God.”

It was widely suspected that Jefferson was an agnostic, maybe even an atheist—in any event, certainly not an orthodox Christian. He seemed to believe in Divine Providence, and he spent long evenings in the White House with a copy of the New Testament and a razor, cutting out all the material he did not like or believe: the virgin birth, the miracles, the resurrection. You can buy

a copy of Jefferson's Bible. It's pretty small.

But in 1802, the year of the White House Cheese, the Baptists—evangelical Christians—loved him for the simple reason that Jefferson was the advocate and author of the notion that all citizens of the United States should enjoy a new freedom, a radical freedom—religious freedom (liberty of conscience, he called it)—and that church and state should be separate and stand alone.

Waldman observes the irony that today the heirs of those Massachusetts Baptists—evangelical Christians—are on the other side of the issue, always trying to blur the line between church and state, advocating state-supported

religion: prayers in the schools, scripture in the courtroom, and evangelical Christianity ladled out to the cadets at the military academies.

Waldman cites the late Jerry Falwell, who said, “Any diligent student of American history finds that our great nation was founded by godly men on godly principles to be a Christian nation.” Fifty-five percent of the American people believe that the Constitution establishes the United States as a Christian nation. That is wrong. They were godly men, but the last thing they intended was a nation with its own favored, sponsored religion. They knew their history, the Founders did. They knew how much blood had been shed by governments in

the name of religion; how it very nearly destroyed Europe; how governments, in the name of religion, could be cruel and persecute, imprison, and execute their own citizens. They wanted none of it. They wanted something new.

When they began to meet as a Continental Congress to discuss the future relationship of the colonies to Great Britain, most colonies had an established, state-supported religion. All but two. Massachusetts had the Puritan church. New York, Virginia ,and the others, the Anglican church, the Church of England. The governments of those colonies were not tolerant of other religions. Massachusetts hounded, persecuted, and banished Quakers and Baptists—anyone who doubted or

questioned the Puritan preachers. The first Presbyterian minister in the colonies, Francis Mackemie, was arrested and thrown in jail in New York for preaching without a license. Elsewhere people were fined for not observing the sabbath and ignoring the church. Catholics were not much tolerated outside of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and there weren't many Jews anywhere.

The tradition, the given, was state-supported religion. Many thought religion couldn't exist without the financial support of the state and state enforcement of religious doctrine and practice. And many thought that a state cannot long exist without the moral and spiritual support of a church.

The miracle was that the Founders came up with something brand new: liberty of conscience, freedom of religion.

They were diverse themselves. Some were Puritans—Sam and John Adams; some were Presbyterians—James Madison and John Witherspoon, the President of the College of New Jersey and the only minister to serve in the Continental Congress and sign the Declaration of Independence. John Jay was an Anglican; so were George Washington and, nominally, Jefferson. Some were orthodox in their beliefs; some were Unitarian; some Deists, believing in a creator God who started things and then retired. The Founders'

own diversity mandated a new approach. Their own diversity, they seemed to understand, was a hint of what the new nation would one day become.

Steven Waldman puts it eloquently: "The Founding Faith was not Christianity and it was not secularism. It was religious liberty, a revolutionary formula for promoting faith by leaving it alone" (p. xvi).

After the War for Independence, the new legislature turned its attention to writing a constitution. Jefferson, by now, was in Paris. The intellectual work was left to his disciple, a small, sickly Presbyterian, a student of John Witherspoon at Princeton who read

theology and considered the ministry, James Madison. Madison's constitution makes no mention of God at all. Religion is there only in Article VI, prohibiting any religious test for public office.

A few years later, the new congress that the Constitution had created approved Madison's proposed ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, the first one of which prohibits the establishment of religion by the government, prohibits the government from doing anything to promote one religion or anything that supports or inhibits the free practice of religion. It was quite an accomplishment, nothing quite like it in the world—a miracle, in fact.

Christianity, we are inclined to forget, was born in the middle of religious entanglement and conflict with the state. The Roman Empire at first ignored Christianity, then for several centuries persecuted it, because Christians—and Jews—insisted that their ultimate loyalty and obeisance belonged to God, not the emperor. Obligatory stops on any Christian's visit to Rome include St. Peter's, the place where the empire executed Jesus' disciple; the prison where St. Paul was held before his execution; the Coliseum and Circus Maximus, where Christians were fed to the lions. Rome ignored, persecuted, and, finally in the fourth century, co-opted Christianity: made it the established religion of the empire, sent legions into battle with the cross of

Christ emblazoned on their shields. From that time until the American experiment, it was the norm for the state to have its own established religion, to support it with taxes, and, in most cases, for the church to support whatever the state was doing, for better or for worse.

It is there from the beginning. During the last week of Jesus' life, in Jerusalem, the authorities came up with a plan to get rid of him. "Let's question his patriotism, his loyalty to Rome." There is no better way to bring him down than to question his patriotism. It's a device used by both political parties still. In fact, questioning patriotism has played a major role in the outcomes of most recent presidential

elections. Jesus' enemies sent their people to see him and to ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Their purpose was transparent: to get him to say something that would either discredit him in the minds of the people or convict him of treason by the Roman governor. "Teacher, we know you are sincere"—talk about damning with faint praise—"tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" "Show me a coin," he said. "Whose image is on it?" It was the emperor. Jews thought it was a graven image: the Romans considered the emperor to be divine. Jews didn't even like to handle the coin. "It's his," Jesus said, dismissively, almost contemptuously. "Give him what is already his. Give to God what is God's." What is God's, of course, is everything:

life itself, heart and soul and mind and strength; everything, even the money Caesar requires. You owe everything to God, and compared to that total commitment, what you owe Caesar amounts to nothing.

It was an amazing answer. They left him and went away. They had failed—this time. Later that week, they would convince the government that it was in its own best interests to get rid of him.

At the heart of religious faith is a deep and profound commitment that exceeds all others. For Christians, it is a commitment and a promise of obedience to the God we have seen in Jesus Christ. Because of the depth of that commitment, it has put Christians and

the Christian church in conflict with political tyranny, which demands that total commitment for itself. Totalitarian governments cannot allow the freedom of conscience that allows individuals to commit themselves to God alone and to question and dissent when the state acts in conflict with the values of that commitment. Hitler had to have the obedience and support of the established church and got it. The Confessing Church, which dissented and insisted that God alone is Lord of the conscience, was persecuted, pastors arrested, driven underground. Stalin shut down most of the churches, executed priests, closed monasteries, and allowed a shell of the Orthodox church to remain so long as it behaved

itself and didn’t criticize the government.

At the heart of Christian faith is a commitment to Jesus Christ—above every other commitment, including commitment to the state. The United States of America, in its founding, understood that and built freedom of conscience into its constitution and into its very soul and, in the process, gave birth to strong political institutions and vigorous religious institutions, as well.

How to love this country and its history and its freedom? I love something the late William Sloane Coffin Jr. said. Coffin was a great patriot: served our county in the Army in World War II, volunteered for Intelligence Duty

in the precursor to the CIA. And he was a great dissenter when he thought the country's policies were morally wrong. "How do you love America?" he asked. "Don't say my country, right or wrong. That's like saying, 'My Grandmother, drunk or sober.' It doesn't get you anywhere. Don't just salute the flag and don't burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean" (*Credo*, pp. 83, 84).

In a cover article, *Time* magazine said there are two kinds of patriotism: a patriotism of affirmation, which remembers and is grateful for all that is good and noble and just about this country—its generosity and open-armed hospitality. It's a patriotism that stands in silent awe at Gettysburg and Omaha Beach, that sees the Statue of Liberty as

a representation of one of the holiest political ideas in the history of the world—the essential equality of every human being—and a country where the world's persecuted and oppressed will find welcome and freedom.

And there is a patriotism of dissent, which loves this country and its highest ideals and values so much that it is willing to object and dissent and protest when those ideals and values are not honored—when, for instance, the government orders its army and its intelligence agencies to torture prisoners, using harsh interrogation measures we called war crimes when employed by other nations. A patriotism of dissent that grieves the loss of our nation's moral credibility and prestige

because of military prisons in which people are kept for years without formal charges and no access to the judicial processes that used to be the envy of the world. A patriotism of dissent that wants to be told the truth by the government, that can't understand why we can't come up with immigration policies that reflect something of the spirit of that wonderful statue in New York Harbor instead of a wall on our Southern border and the ejection of hard-working neighbors who come here for jobs and hope and a better life and do the work we no longer want to do for ourselves.

We need both patriotisms, affirmation and dissent. Both are precious.

And so let us remember and affirm and be grateful for all that is good and just and brave about our nation and for the precious liberty of conscience we enjoy.

And let us love our country so much that we will dissent, even when it is not popular, and object when the very ideals and values we respect and love are forgotten and demeaned.

And let us, as Abraham Lincoln said, "turn ourselves to the tasks ahead." Let us trust this system of openness, honesty, accountability—which promises so simply and eloquently, liberty and justice for all—to deliver on that promise. And let us take upon ourselves

the responsibility and the privilege as citizens of the United States of America.

Amen.